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## Minority Schools and the Politics of Education

Thomas Sowell  
Senior Fellow, Hoover Institution

**N**obel laureate Milton Friedman has called him "brilliant." House Majority Leader Dick Armey has called him "profound." *Forbes* magazine has called him "one of the greatest economists of our age." With a Ph. D. in economics from the University of Chicago, Thomas Sowell has taught at Amherst, Cornell, Brandeis, and



UCLA. He has also been a scholar at the Urban Institute and Stanford's Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences.

For many years now, he has been the Rose and Milton Friedman Senior Fellow in

Public Policy at Stanford's Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace. He writes a regular column for *Forbes* and a nationally syndicated newspaper column. He is best known for nearly 20 books, including *Inside American Education*, *Knowledge and Decisions*, *A Conflict of Visions*, and a three-volume series: *Race and Culture*, *Migrations and Cultures*, and *Conquests and Cultures*. ▲

*Economist and social scientist Thomas Sowell identifies schools for low-income and minority students that have long been models of success but that have been threatened and even ruined by what he calls the "politics of education."*

*Dr. Sowell's remarks were delivered at Hillsdale's Shavano Institute for National Leadership seminar, "Education in America: Schools and Strategies that Work," in Seattle last fall.*

**W**ill Rogers once said that it was not ignorance that was so bad, but as he put it, "all the things we know that ain't so." Nowhere is this more true than in American education today, where fashions prevail and evidence is seldom asked for or given. And nowhere does this do more harm than in the education of minority children.

The quest for esoteric methods of trying to educate these children proceeds as if such children had never been successfully educated before, when in fact there are concrete examples, both from history and from our own times, of schools that have been successful in educating children from low-income families and from minority families. Yet the educational dogma of the day is that you simply cannot expect children who are not middle class to do well on standardized tests, for all sorts of sociological and psychological reasons.

Those who think this way are undeterred by the fact that there are schools where low-income and minority students do score well on standardized tests. These students are like the bumblebees who supposedly should not be able to fly according to the theories of aerodynamics, but who fly anyway, in disregard of those theories.

## The Dunbar School

While there are examples of schools where this happens in our own time—both public and private, secular and religious—we can also go back a hundred years and find the same phenomenon. In Washington, D.C., in the 1890s there were four academic public high schools—one black and three white. The black high school was called the M Street School and after 1916 it was renamed Dunbar High School. (I refer to it as Dunbar here.)

In standardized tests given in 1899, Dunbar averaged higher test scores than students in two of the three white high schools. This was not a fluke. It so happens that I have followed 85 years of the history of this black high school—from 1870 to 1955—and found it repeatedly equaling or exceeding national norms on standardized tests. Its academic performances on standardized tests remained good on into the mid-1950s.

When I first published this information more than 20 years ago, those few educators who responded at all dismissed the relevance of my findings by saying that these were “middle-class” children and therefore their experience was not “relevant” to the education of low-income minority children. Those who said this had no factual data on the incomes or occupations of the parents of these children—and I did.

The problem, however, was not that these dismissive educators did not have evidence. The more fundamental problem was that they saw no need for evidence. According to their doctrines, children who did well on standardized tests were middle class. These children did well on such tests, therefore, they were middle class.

Lack of evidence is not the problem. There was evidence on the occupations of the parents of the children at this school as far back as the early 1890s. As of academic year 1892-93, there were 83 known occupations of the parents of the children attending Dunbar. Fifty-one parents were laborers and one was a doctor. That doesn't sound very middle class to me.

Over the years, a significant black middle class did develop in Washington and no doubt most of its members sent their children to Dunbar. But that is wholly different from saying that most of the children at that school came from middle-class homes.

During the later period for which I collected data, there were far more children whose mothers were maids than there were whose fathers were doctors. For many years, there was only one academic high school for blacks in the District of Columbia and, as late as 1948, one-third of all black youngsters attending high school in Washington attended Dunbar High School. So this was not a “selective” school in

the sense in which we normally use that term—there were no tests to take to get in, for example—even though there was undoubtedly self-selection in the sense that students who were serious went to Dunbar and those who were not had other places where they could while away their time without having to meet high academic standards.

A spot-check of attendance records and tardiness records showed that the M Street School at the turn of the century, and Dunbar High School at mid-century, had less absenteeism and less tardiness than the white high schools in the District of Columbia at those times. The school had a tradition of being serious, going back to its founders and early principals.

Among these early principals was the first black woman to receive a college degree in the United States—Mary Jane Patterson—from Oberlin College, Class of 1862. At that time, Oberlin had different academic curriculum requirements for men and women. Latin, Greek, and mathematics were required in the “gentlemen's course,” as it was called, but not in the curriculum for ladies. Miss Patterson, however, insisted on taking Latin, Greek, and mathematics anyway. Not surprisingly, in her 12 years as principal of the black high school in Washington, she was noted for “a strong, forceful personality,” for “thoroughness,” and for being “an indefatigable worker.” Having this kind of person shaping the standards and traditions of the school in its formative years undoubtedly had something to do with its later success.

Other early principals included the first black man to graduate from Harvard, Class of 1870. Four of the school's first eight principals graduated from Oberlin and two from Harvard. Because of restricted academic opportunities for blacks, Dunbar had three Ph.D.'s among its teachers in the 1920s.

## Dunbar's Academic Success

One of the other educational dogmas of our times is the notion that standardized tests do not predict future performance for minority children, either in academic institutions or in life. Innumerable scholarly studies have devastated this claim intellectually, though it still survives and flourishes politically.

But the history of this black high school in Washington likewise shows a payoff for solid academic preparation and the test scores that result from it. Over the entire 85-year history of academic success of this school, from 1870 to 1955, most of its graduates went on to higher education. This was very unusual for either black or white high school graduates during this era. Because these were low-income students, most went to a local free teachers college, but sig-

nificant numbers won scholarships to leading colleges and universities elsewhere.

Some Dunbar graduates began going to Harvard and other academically elite colleges in the early twentieth century. As of 1916, there were nine black students from the entire country attending Amherst College. Six were from Dunbar. During the period from 1918 to 1923, graduates of this school went on to earn 25 degrees from Ivy League colleges, Amherst, Williams, and Wesleyan. Over the period from 1892 to 1954, Amherst admitted 34 Dunbar graduates. Of these, 74 percent graduated, and more than one-fourth of these graduates were Phi Beta Kappa. No systematic study has been made of the later careers of the graduates of this school. However, when the late black educator Horace Mann Bond studied the backgrounds of blacks with Ph.D.'s, he discovered that more of them had graduated from Dunbar than from any other black high school in the country.

The first blacks to graduate from West Point and Annapolis also came from this school. So did the first black full professor at a major university (Allison Davis at the University of Chicago). So did the first federal judge, the first black general, the first black Cabinet member, the first black elected to the United States Senate since Reconstruction. During World War II, when black military officers were rare, there were more than two dozen Dunbar graduates holding ranks ranging from major to brigadier general.

All this contradicts another widely believed notion—that schools do not make much difference in children's academic or career success because income and family background are much larger influences. If the schools do not differ very much from one another, then of course it will not make much difference which one a child attends. But when they differ dramatically, the results can also differ dramatically.

## How Politics Doomed Dunbar

**D**unbar was not the only school to achieve success with minority children. But, before turning to some other examples, it may be useful to consider why and how this 85-year history of unusual success was abruptly turned into typical failure, almost overnight, by the politics of education.

As we all know, 1954 was the year of the famous racial desegregation case of *Brown v. Board of Education*. Those of us old enough to remember those days also know of the strong resistance to school desegregation in many white communities, including Washington, D.C. Ultimately, a political compromise was worked out. In order to comply with the law, without having a massive shift of students, the District's school officials decided to turn all pub-

lic schools into neighborhood schools.

By this time, the neighborhood around Dunbar High School was run-down. This had not affected the school's academic standards. Black students from all over the city went to Dunbar, but very few of those who lived in its immediate vicinity did.

When Dunbar became a neighborhood school, the whole character of its student body changed radically—and the character of its teaching staff changed very soon afterward. In the past, many Dunbar teachers continued to teach for years after they were eligible for retirement because it was such a fulfilling experience. Now, as inadequately educated, inadequately motivated, and disruptive students flooded into the school, teachers began retiring, some as early as 55 years of age. Inside of a very few years, Dunbar became just another failing ghetto school, with all the problems that such schools have, all across the country. Eighty-five years of achievement simply vanished into thin air.

It is a very revealing fact about the politics of education that no one tried to stop this from happening. When I first began to study the history of Dunbar back in the 1970s, I thought that it was inconceivable that this could have been allowed to happen without a protest. I knew that the Washington school board in the 1950s included a very militant and distinguished black woman named Margaret Just Butcher who was also a graduate of Dunbar High School. Surely Dr. Butcher had not let all this happen without exercising her well-known gift of withering criticism.

Yet, I looked in vain through the minutes of the school board for even a single sentence by anybody expressing any concern whatever about the fate of Dunbar High School under the new reorganization plan. Finally, in complete frustration and bewilderment, I phoned Dr. Butcher herself. Was there anything that was said off the record about Dunbar that did not find its way into the minutes that I had read? "No," she said. Then she reminded me that racial "integration" was the battle cry of the hour in the 1950s. No one thought about what would happen to black schools, not even Dunbar.

Now, decades later, we still do not have racial integration in many of the urban schools around the country—and we also do not have Dunbar High School. Such are the ways of politics, where the crusade of the hour often blocks out everything else, at least until another crusade comes along and takes over the same monopoly of our minds.

Ironically, black high schools in Washington today have many of the so-called "prerequisites" for good education that never existed in the heyday of Dunbar High School, and yet the educational results are abysmal. "Adequate funding" is always included among these prerequisites, and today the per-pupil

expenditure in the District of Columbia is among the highest in the nation. During its peak, Dunbar was starved for funds and its average class size was in the 40s. Its lunchroom was so small that many of its students had to eat out on the streets. Its blackboards were cracked, and it was 1950 before the school had a public address system. Yet, at that point, it had 80 years of achievement behind it—and only 5 more in front of it.

## Other Successful Schools

**A**nother black school that I studied—P.S. 91 in Brooklyn, New York—was housed in an even older building than the original Dunbar High School. It still had gas jets in the hallways, left over from the gaslight era. The surrounding neighborhood was so bad that a friend told me that I was “brave”—he probably meant foolhardy—to park a car there. Yet the students in most of the grades in this predominantly black elementary school scored at or above the national norms on standardized tests.

This was not in any sense a middle-class school or a magnet school. It was just an ordinary ghetto school run by an extraordinary principal.

Educators usually like to give guided tours to selected (and often atypical) places, much like the Potemkin village tours in Czarist Russia. But, in P.S. 91, I was allowed to wander down the halls and arbitrarily pick out which classrooms I wanted to go into. I did this on every floor of the school. Inside those classrooms were black children much like children you can find in any ghetto across the country. Many came from broken homes and were on welfare. Yet, inside this school, they spoke in grammatical English, in complete sentences, and to the point. Many of the materials they were studying were a year or more ahead of their respective grade levels.

It so happened that I had to fly back to California right after visiting this school and did not get to talk to all the people I wanted to interview. I asked a mother who was head of the school’s Parent-Teacher Association if I could call her at home after I got back to California and interview her over the phone. It turned out that she did not have a telephone. “I can’t afford one,” she said. That, too, hardly seemed middle class.

Others have found successful black schools operating in equally grim surroundings and under simi-

lar social conditions—for example, Catholic schools such as Holy Angel in Chicago, St. Gregory in New York, and East Catholic High in Detroit. Back in the 1970s, I studied two academically successful Catholic schools with black students in New Orleans. In both schools, a majority of the parental occupations were in the “unskilled and semi-skilled” category. Yet the dogma marches on that a middle class background is necessary for academic success.

St. Augustine High School in New Orleans was a particularly striking example of achieving academic success while going against the grain of prevailing opinion in educational circles. It was established back in 1951, during the era of racial segregation in the South, as a school for black boys, presided over by an all-white staff from the Josephite order. None of these young priests had ever taken a course in a department or school of education. There was no unifying educational theory. To the horror of some outside members of the order, the school used corporal punishment.

The school kept doing things that worked and discarded things that didn’t.

The first black student from the South to win a National Merit Scholarship came from St. Augustine. So did the first Presidential Scholar of any race from the state of Louisiana. As of 1974, 20 percent of all Presidential Scholars in the history of the state had come from this school with about 600 black students.

Test scores were never used as a rigid cutoff for admission to St. Augustine. There were students with IQs in the 60s, as well as others with IQs more than twice that high. For individual students and for the school as a whole, the average IQ rose over the years—being in the 80s and 90s in the 1950s and reaching the national average of 100 in the 1960s. To put this in perspective, both blacks and whites in the South during this era tended to score below the national average on IQ and other standardized tests.

Most of these children did not come from middle-class families. Those whose parents were in professional or white-collar occupations were less than one-tenth as numerous as those whose parents worked in “unskilled and semi-skilled” occupations.

## Secrets of Success

**W**hat are the “secrets” of such successful schools? The biggest secret is that there are no secrets, unless work is a secret. Work seems to be the only four-letter





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Microsoft Vice President John Kelly presented Dr. Roche with a \$600,000 software gift to Hillsdale College. 🏰



Hillsdale College President George Roche honored Thomas Sowell with the prestigious Adam Smith Award. 🏰



Sister Marie Vianney of St. Michael's Academy in Spokane received the Henry Salvatori Prize for Excellence in Teaching from Dr. Roche and Hillsdale Academy Headmaster Scot Hicks. 🏰

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